

The Siege of Tobruk

Tobruk is a small but important port on the coast of Cyrenaica in Libya. In pre-war times its population numbered around 4,000. In 1941 its importance was greatly increased because, without it being secured, any advance beyond it, in either an easterly or westerly direction, was seriously imperilled. First the possession of Tobruk was essential as an unloading point for supplies and reinforcements, which otherwise had to be brought along difficult and lengthy lines of communication, from Alexandria in one direction or Benghazi in the other. Secondly, in the hands of a determined and aggressive garrison it represented a serious offensive threat to the flank of any advance which might bypass it.

When Wavell's forces captured it from the Italians in January 1941 its defences were significant; the perimeter extended some 35 - 40 miles with dugouts heavily concreted into the ground, many cleverly improvised from natural caves. The dugouts were connected by trenches with locations for machine guns and anti-tank guns every few hundred yards.

In April 1941, during his rapid advance across the western desert, Rommel initially intended to recapture Tobruk and so eliminate it as a hazard on his drive towards Egypt. He did not anticipate any great difficulty as Wavell had captured it from the Italians in two days. However, in the event the 9th Australian Division and remnants of the 3rd Armoured Brigade were more than a match for the dying momentum of Rommel's advance. From then on, Tobruk was in a constant state of siege; however it was not a siege in the normal sense, as constant contact was maintained with the main allied forces of the Royal Navy. It was a siege in the sense that Tobruk was under constant attack from the enemy, as every inch of the defended area was within range of the German artillery. The survival of Tobruk relied entirely on the harbour being kept in working order and the continuance of supplies along the sea routes from Egypt. Everything had to be brought in by sea, and Rommel realising this concentrated almost as much on neutralising the harbour and interrupting that life line, as he did on continuing the landbased assault.

When the siege first began the sea supply service was heavily improvised, as had been the perimeter defences and the anti-aircraft barrage. Gradually

improved landing craft with the ability to “beach” were brought into service; they stood a better chance of survival than conventional ships which had to moor against the quayside. The German air-force, particularly their Stuka dive-bombers, were unchallenged in the air, as the RAF Hurricanes were unable to operate from their airstrips which were under continuous fire.

It was a grim and bitter battle. Writing about it later, Rommel said the Australians fought with remarkable tenacity. Even their wounded went on defending themselves with small arms fire and stayed in the fight to their last breath. They were immensely brave men, who represented the elite of the British Empire. By the time Tobruk had been under siege for a month the area around the town was littered with burned out tanks, vehicles and all the debris of war. The town itself was reduced to a heap of rubble, in which only one house remained standing; and in this, despite the fact that it stood out like a sore thumb, the army maintained its operational HQ. As time went on conditions in the besieged area became steadily worse, and Rommel’s determination to subdue the fortress increased.

Churchill too was highly sensitive to the importance of Tobruk and the role it should play in the Middle East campaign. In late August he began to receive demands from the Australian government for the withdrawal of their troops from Tobruk. In response to this the British commander Auchinleck had already relieved one Australian brigade with Polish units; but this was not enough and public opinion in Australia was said to be anxious about the declining health of their troops. It was not an easy changeover, but by late September the rest of the Australians had been replaced by the British 70th division. With the relief of the Australians by fresh troops there was now sufficient force to contemplate the possibility of a breakout, to coincide with the planned 8th Army offensive code-named Operation Crusader.

By the end of November the defenders inside the perimeter could hear the fierce battle to the east where the 8th Army was fighting to reach them. However much hard fighting lay ahead and it was not until December that land communications between the garrison and the 8th Army were once again firmly established. During the siege a total of 26 ships were lost and a further 62 damaged as they attempted to re-supply the defenders. British casualties

were 5,898 including missing and wounded. German and Italian casualties were 5,388, including 1,600 missing and wounded.

However in June 1942 during the last German advance eastwards Tobruk was easily overrun, and remained in German hands until it was finally recaptured by the advancing 8th Army following its success at the battle of El Alamein.